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AUTHOR Willey, Susan
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ABSTRACT

A study examined news coverage by "The Saint Petersburg Times" of a local double teen suicide in August 1993. Focusing on how the story was covered, the study explored the newspaper's decision-making process, analyzing the process in relation to standard philosophical methods in ethics and recognized journalistic principles. As background, psychological research on suicide and the media was reviewed and interviews with mental health professionals and persons close to the victims were conducted. The newspaper ran headlines that read "Teens leap to death in lovers' pact at Skyway" and "Northeast High students reportedly were distraught over Marc's impending move to Cincinnati." Reporters interviewed high school friends and officials, and much space was devoted to the story. A clinical psychologist and professor who belongs to a post-prevention team that works with youth in schools where a student has committed suicide has urged caution by the press when reporting teen suicide and feels that the media must assume ethical responsibility for such a story. Suggested guidelines for journalists on how to cover a teen suicide story include: (1) sensitivity to the pain and shock of surviving friends and family; (2) self-questioning about what the public really needs to know about a suicide; (3) caution about using quotes obtained in this highly emotional situation; (4) inclusion of information on how to recognize suicidal signs and where to call for help; and (5) development of proactive stories that educate the public. (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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Ethical Issues in Covering Teen Suicide Stories: Deadly Dilemmas and Fatal Flaws

Susan Willey
M.A. Candidate
University of South Florida-St. Petersburg
3001 58th Ave. S. # 412
St. Petersburg, FL 33712

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Abstract

This paper examines the news coverage by *The St. Petersburg Times* in reporting on a double teen suicide in August 1993 in St. Petersburg, Fla. The paper explores the newspaper's decision-making process in determining how to play the stories and analyzes this process in relation to standard philosophical methods in ethics and recognized journalistic principles. The paper also reviews some of the extensive psychological research on suicide and the media and reports on the reactions of the newspaper's coverage from people close to the suicide victims. Based on this research and interviews with mental health experts, a set of guidelines has been developed to serve as a discussion point in the ethical decision-making process for the media as they struggle to provide responsible, ethical coverage of teen suicides.

Ethical Issues in Covering Teen Suicide Stories:

Deadly Dilemmas and Fatal Flaws:

Journalists work with life and death situations nearly every day, reporting on the tragic, traumatic, and dramatic situations within their communities. The social responsibility of this reporting calls for the journalist to consider the effects of the story upon the community. This goes beyond reporting the facts and informing the public, and even beyond the impact upon victims' families. Reporters must consider the impact upon the entire community (Steele, 1989). Psychologists say the media's reporting of teen-age suicide poses a special risk element to psychologically vulnerable teens. The manner in which teen suicide is reported may promote more suicides or suicide attempts or, conversely, may offer hope to at-risk teenagers. If journalists' words have the potential to cause irreparable harm, it is imperative that gatekeepers engage in some kind of ethical decision-making process before the story is published.

This paper will examine the *St. Petersburg Times'* coverage of a double teen suicide in August 1993. After recounting the story coverage, and examining the decision-making process of the newspaper, this paper will review some of the psychological research on the effect of the media reports on teen suicide and will also discuss some concerns of the media regarding teen suicide stories. The way in which *The Times* handled the story will be examined in relation to standard philosophical arguments

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on ethical decision-making and in relation to journalistic principles. The paper's conclusion will summarize the newspaper's decision-making process and include specific guidelines for journalists to use as a discussion starting point in deciding how to remain true to journalistic principles without unwittingly causing irreparable harm in their coverage of teen suicides.

I. THE STORY

On Tuesday, August 24, 1993, a body washed ashore at the mouth of Tampa Bay near the Sunshine Skyway bridge in St. Petersburg, Fla. The incident was nothing more than a notation on a police blotter. It was routinely picked up by a police reporter at the *St. Petersburg Times,* and a photographer was sent to take a picture of rescue personnel recovering the body. The photo ran in the next day's newspaper. There was now an element of mystery. Who was this young female? What had happened to her? Why was she dead, floating in the bay? The facts would unfold soon (Martin, personal communication, November 17, 1993).

On Thursday, August 26, 1993, the newspaper ran a page one story with a black and white mug shot of the teenager whose body had been found. There was now new information. Another body had been recovered from the bay. This was the first the readers knew there were two deaths - a 16-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy. The headline read "Teens leap to death in lovers' pact at Skyway" with the subhead reading, "Northeast High Students Donna Marie Klein and Marc Weigel reportedly were distraught over Marc's

impending move to Cincinnati." Marc's body had been found Wednesday in the bay. The story recounted the love the teens had for each other and their distress at the prospect of being separated because Marc's mother had decided to send him to live with his father out of state. The lead was: "Donna Marie Klein and Marc Weigel wanted their young love to be remembered." The second graph told how the two teens used lipstick to mark their names on a sign. An inside black-and-white photo showed the sign with the notation upon it - "Donna + Mark" printed in block letters. The report also gave a brief physical description of the bodies saying they had severe head injuries and broken legs from the jump.

The story tracked the teens' journey that day, interviewing friends, school and police officials, until they caught a ride late that night and were dropped off at the bridge. The first story was placed above the fold, in the upper left corner of the paper - a prime spot, usually reserved for a news/feature column. The lead story focused on the U.S. Navy's terminating a contract with a Tampa shipyard. The inside jump not only had the photo of the bridge sign, but also carried a box listing suicide prevention telephone numbers to call in this area (St. Petersburg Times, Aug. 26, 1993).

The second, and last story on the incident ran the following day, Friday, inside in the Tampa Bay section of the newspaper at the bottom of the page. This story ran with the headline, "A struggle for meaning from tragedy" and a subhead of "Friends,

family and experts search to understand the deaths of two Pinellas teens, part of a growing national problem." The lead graph described how a friend had cried after learning of the deaths, and explored the phenomena of teen suicide, quoting one friend as saying that teenagers routinely talk about killing themselves. The girl's mugshot ran again, and this article also featured a mugshot of the boy who died. There was a boxed reference note above the story referring readers to the jump on "possible indicators of suicide." On the jump, page 12, the warning signs of suicide were listed. In addition to reporting on the reaction of friends and teachers, the reporters also interviewed two mental health experts, on local and one national. The story quoted statistical data on the increase of teen suicide. (St. Petersburg Times, Aug. 27, 1993).

II. THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Susan Taylor Martin, deputy managing editor of the St. Petersburg Times, said that, in general, the newspaper doesn't run stories on suicide (personal communication, November 17, 1993). ***The Times*** style manual gives a warning about using the word "suicide," and says: "Be careful in its usage. Be sure to say who determined that the death was a suicide. As a general rule, we do not write stories about suicides unless the person was prominent or committed suicide in such a way as to draw public attention" (Times Style, 1992, p. 277). Craig Basse, a staff member who edits the style book, said the suicide policy was written about five years ago to provide consistency in

suicide coverage. He said that the policy is flexible in that it allows each situation to be considered individually, according to usual news criteria (personal communication, December 1, 1993).

Martin said the newspaper was committed to providing further coverage of this story because it had already run the photo of the unidentified body and needed a follow-up story to provide an explanation to the readers. Even without that, however, Martin maintains that the story itself justified coverage based on usual news criteria - it was an unusual and dramatic happening that occurred at a public place and affected several hundred people, in this instance mostly students at two high schools where the teens had attended classes. This was a story "hundreds, if not thousands" of people would be talking about, and one the newspaper had an obligation to cover, she said (personal communication, November 17, 1993). There was no discussion about whether to cover the suicides. The discussions centered on how to cover the suicides. This was low-keyed and followed regular newsroom routines, Martin said. While the story was recognized as sensitive, it was not considered any different from other sensitive stories such as those on child abuse or rape, she said.

The routines of news gathering, conferring with section editors, and laying the story out on the table for the 5 p.m. news budget planning session were followed the same as any other story, she said. Martin said she strongly felt this was a page one story, and so did the other editors in the meeting. "It was unusual, dramatic and a tragic story that affected many people,"

she said. Throughout the day, as reporters gathered information, they conferred with editors in what she described as a standard newsroom routine in any sensitive story. After discussions with editors, the reporters completed writing the stories, which were edited again by editors conferring with reporters. The process again was routine as the stories were sent to desk personnel for final editing and headline writing. Martin said she had no input into the writing of the headline, but thought it told the story, and was better than using the word "suicide." Use of the photos of the teens was also standard practice, she said. "People want to know what they looked like" (personal communication, November 17, 1993).

The boxes detailing suicide prevention information on numbers to call seeking help and giving information on the warning signs of suicide is also usual practice in the newsroom, she said. Boxes are often used in stories to highlight information, whether this is how to get help from mental health agencies or noting telephone numbers for rape crisis lines. Martin said through usual newspaper routines, the newspaper handled the story as sensitively as possible. She said she does not believe the suicides were romanticized by the newspaper any more than the story itself indicated. In fact, Martin said she believes the newspaper played a positive role in this story by bringing an important issue in the open and providing information on prevention. By printing the second day story and recounting the pain and loss experienced by the teens' friends, and quoting

psychologists and information on suicide warning signs, the newspaper provided a public service so people could become more aware of the issue and have information to seek help, she said.

III. WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

It is not the media's coverage of suicides that dismays mental health experts so much as the kind of coverage that sometimes occurs. The way in which teen suicide stories are handled may not only inform, but also have the possibility of encouraging further deaths, and as such should be viewed differently than other sensitive stories, psychologists said (Several studies (Berman, 1989a, 1989b; Colt, 1991, Davidson, et al, 1989). Recent psychological research indicates that news reports of suicide do influence teens who are considered psychologically susceptible. But experts also say that reading about suicide doesn't make a person suicidal (Colt, 1991, p. 82).

New data from the National Center for Health Statistics released by the American Association of Suicidology showed that in 1991 4,751 young people aged 15 to 24 took their lives. That equates to 13 youth suicides each day. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for the young, ranking behind accidents and homicide. Each suicide intimately affects at least six other people, the report said (AAS, 1993). The U.S. Department of Health & Human Service Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide noted the magnitude of the problem of youth suicides, and said that the suicide rate for people aged 15 to 24 tripled between 1950 to 1980 (ADAMHA, 1989, Vol 1, p. 1, 5). The report

recommended that particular attention should be given to the way in which media portray suicidal behavior that may contribute to a contagion effect. The report also said that psychologists and societal institutions should make more attempts to enter into a cooperative effort with the media in developing prevention efforts (pp. 48-49).

This subject has long been a topic of concern among members of the medical community. In 1774, a novel about a romantic hero named Werther who committed suicide was said to have triggered numerous imitation suicides. This phenomena of imitation suicides is now known as "the Werther effect" (Ziesenis, 1991, p. 235 and Littmann, 1985, p. 43). In 1828, an English doctor warned his colleagues of the suggestibility of people inclined toward suicide and urged them to prevent these people from reading any newspapers "lest the disposition and the mode be suggested by something similar" (Colt, 1991, p. 89). Amariah Brigham, the founder of the *American Journal of Insanity*, warned in 1845 that suicides are often committed from imitation and "a single paragraph may suggest suicide to 20 persons" (Motto, 1967, p. 156). A cluster of suicides in Ohio in 1910 was blamed on the press for describing the dosages of poison used in suicide attempts and in 1984, *The New York Times* published an article, "Is Suicide a Sin?" which was also blamed for provoking numerous suicides. (Colt, 1991, p. 90).

In his 1897 study, sociologist Emile Durkheim concluded that newspaper reports of suicide did not have an effect on the

overall suicide rate of a population, but may only affect those suggestible individuals who would have committed suicide anyway (p. 90). Recent studies have provided strong evidence that teenagers especially are prone to be influenced by media reports of suicide, particularly if these teens are troubled themselves (Colt, p. 90-93). In one 1989 study, a group of physicians and psychologists examined the pattern of a series of teen suicides in Texas (Davidson, et. al., 1989, 2687-2692). They not only identified new risk factors - that teens with a history of violent or destruction behavior are at increased risk - but they also found that exposure to media accounts of a suicide greatly increased the possibility of suicide among susceptible, at-risk teens - but not on all teen-agers.

They concluded that sensationalized, romanticized media coverage fosters an identification pattern among vulnerable teenagers, creating a "celebrity status" for the person who committed suicide (pp. 2691-2). Motto (1967) did a comparison study on suicide rates in cities that had newspapers who were on strike and not publishing. He concurred with Durkheim's earlier findings, but noted that sociological variables must be considered as should the "pathological susceptibility" of the individual (p. 159). He also said there is a pattern of suicides when there is strong identification with the person who committed suicide. Motto noted that attempts of suicide should also be considered in publicity effects, not just the completed act (pp. 158-159).

Alan L. Berman, a past president of the American Association of Suicidology, and a clinical psychologist who has studied suicide for more than 22 years, said the press needs to develop reasonable standards that take into account the recent psychological research that shows the media's influence on vulnerable people in society. The media have an obligation to be aware of this connection and to take steps to lessen the negative impact of suicide stories (personal communication, November 11, 1993).

In his report for the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, Berman (1989) said that the mass media are not responsible for causing youth suicide nor are they responsible for its prevention (ADAMHA, Vol.3, p. 282). He further asserted, however, that the media have great potential to affect the message given to the public on suicide. He condemned the idea of censorship or prior restraint, but added,

> "Consultative discussion between the media and suicidologists might...achieve some desired balance between the public's need to know, the media's right to report and alternative consequences" (p, 282).

Berman (1989) did a study surveying 15 newspaper editors to define their concept of "newsworthiness" regarding suicide stories. He concluded that, while most print media operate under self-imposed censorship, the editors prided themselves on knowing the standards of their own communities, and they trusted their own judgments while rejecting someone else's imposed ethical

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standards regarding the newsworthiness of a suicide story (ADAMHA, Vol. 4, pp. 189-192). When the editors were asked how they would react if there were scientific proof that media coverage caused more suicides in a community, the editors were nearly equally divided between those who cited the First Amendment and their right to publish and those who said they would respond with greater caution and be more low-keyed (pp. 192-193).

Jennifer Friday, a psychologist with the Center for Disease Control, Division of Violence Prevention, in Atlanta, said studies show that media coverage of teen suicide carries a risk to vulnerable teens. She suggested the media inform themselves about the topic and make sure the suicide is reported as a tragic consequence that is preventable (personal communication, November 12, 1993). In his studies of suicide and newspaper reporting, Sebastian K. Littmann (1985) asserted that psychologically vulnerable individuals are more influenced by media reports than are others in the population. He suggested the only way to counteract this influence on such people is for the media to devote attention to "counter suggestions" (pp. 48-49). He made several recommendations such as making sure the media alerted the community to potential risks by publishing suicide warning signs with any suicide story. He also warned of dangers in the journalists' attempts at objectivity and in over-reporting the suicide. By refraining from any value judgments on suicide and over-reporting the incident, the media may give the

impression that suicide is not only an acceptable option, but is a commonplace occurrence and a normal thing to do (p. 49).

Rick Weinberg, a clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of South Florida, is a member of a post-prevention team that works with youth in schools where a student has committed suicide. He also urged caution by the press when reporting a teen suicide (personal communication, November 12, 1993). Weinberg suggested the press not use the word "suicide," and instead state the person died, because often it is unclear whether suicide is an accurate description. In the case of the two teens, Weinberg said the possibility exists that one teen-ager tried to save the other and accidently fell from the bridge in a failed rescue attempt (personal communication, November 12, 1993).

The way in which the press reports the suicide can influence teens already in crisis. These teens at-risk are already despondent and have impulsive behavior, poor judgment, and a low tolerance frustration level (personal communication, November, 12, 1993). Weinberg said the media play a prominent role in bringing issues to light, but the media must also assume ethical responsibility for the story. He said it is imperative that stories include information on how to seek help and that they not describe the exact method of suicide. He also urged reporters to go beyond the usual coverage of facts to promote healthy ways to resolve problems including publishing quotes from mental health experts.

The most important thing the media can do is to develop standards on how they will handle suicide stories based on more than 10 years of studies that have demonstrated that youth are very vulnerable and are motivated to act based on what they read and see, he said (personal communication, November 12, 1993).

Media experts also recognized the need to use caution and ethical decision-making in the reporting of suicides. In an article in *Editor & Publisher* University of North Texas Counselor John Hipple and university journalism Professor Richard Wells (1989) discussed the "deadly consequences" of irresponsible media reporting of teen suicides (pp. 72, 54-55). The potential for imitation or cluster suicides is great among at-risk teenagers, and can be triggered by unethical reporting, they said. They identified several problem areas for journalists in reporting teen suicides and made suggestions on how to write these stories. They urged that suicides not be played on the front page, and the word suicide not be used in headlines. They also warned about using quotes that give the impression that the dead person is in a better place. They encouraged reporters to leave out the details of how the person committed suicide, and highly recommended journalists discuss the story with a mental health expert, and do follow up stories that provide viable alternatives for the depressed person. (pp. 54-55).

Perry Catlin, (1989) in an article in *FineLine*, a newsletter on journalism ethics, discussed the ethical problems in covering a teen suicide. He quoted media guidelines developed by

sociologist David Phillips and Katherine Lesyna from the University of California that emphasized previously discussed suggestions and encouraged the media to purposely connect the suicide with negative consequences such as pain for the survivors. They cautioned about presenting sympathetic people appearing to condone or justify the suicide (p. 7). George Howe Colt (1991) quoted Phillips as saying that, although the evidence establishes a "compelling link" between the media and suicide, the news story itself does not cause suicide (p. 91). Phillips, like Berman, agreed that the factors causing suicide are more complex than that. As Phillips said, "I'm studying the trigger and not what loaded the gun" (p. 91).

IV. WHAT THOSE AFFECTED BY THE SUICIDE SAY

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics states that journalists should be accountable to the public for their reports (Black, Steele, Barney, 1993, p. 4). In general, the public often reacts strongly and negatively toward the media in its coverage of teen suicides. Christopher Lukas and Henry M. Seiden (1987) said that at a suicide survivors' conference at Rutgers University many blamed the press for romanticizing suicide and helped cause the deaths of their loved ones. This attitude is "an especially recurrent theme among suicide survivors" (p. 22).

Although *Times'* editor Martin said she knew of no negative comments from readers regarding the newspaper's coverage of the two teen-agers' deaths (personal communication, November 17,

1993), the media coverage was criticized by people close to the victims. Jeri Gray, a counselor at Northeast High School where both young people were students, said the only good the media did in covering the suicide was to provide a good focus for the anger in the surviving students and helped them to vent it (personal communication, November 17, 1993). Gray said the student and faculty reaction to the media coverage was negative, especially the television coverage, which was thought to be excessively intrusive and sensationalized - displaying the girl's suicide note and following the family to the memorial service and funeral. The principal banned the media from the campus, she said, but television cameras still shot footage of the school and students.

The newspaper's coverage glorified and romanticized the suicides and created a "theatrical" story of a Romeo and Juliet-style death, she said. If the media have to cover suicides, they must indicate that suicide is not an acceptable option, she said (personal communication, November 17, 1993).

Sue Berg, a friend of the mother of one of the suicide victims, said she was appalled and is still angry over the television coverage of the suicide and its intrusion into private grief at the funeral and prayer services (personal communication, November 24, 1993). Cameras followed friends of the two youths when they took flowers to the bridge to hold their own memorial service, she said. Berg said she understood the suicides were a legitimate newspaper story, and in general thought the newspaper

staff conducted themselves well in attempting to get information, but that television reports crossed the line into sensationalism. Newspaper reporters called the family once to request information, which she said was justified and fair. Television reporters intruded into private mourning, she said. In their attempt to get a story, television journalists tried to question the 9-year-old sister of one suicide victim as family members picked her up at school. She had not yet been informed of her sister's death, she said. She criticized the manner in which the newspaper portrayed the suicide as a Romeo and Juliet love affair. She said that portrayal wasn't true; in fact the girl was dating other boys.

Berg suggested that the media be careful in finding people to comment because some of the students interviewed hardly knew the two youth. She encouraged the press to play the story on the inside pages with fewer detail and to make sure the story not assign blame because parents and friends were already struggling with guilt. She said a radio talk show host placed the blame on the parents (personal communication, November 24, 1993). Berg, whose 16-year-old daughter was a good friend of the suicide victims, said it is important the media make clear that suicide is not the solution to teen-agers' problems. Both Gray and Berg said the suicides of the two youth prompted other suicide attempts among the students at the school (personal communication, November 17, 24, 1993).

V. WHAT THE PHILOSOPHERS SAY

The basic problems encountered in journalism have always been "philosophical and mainly ethical," media ethics experts say (Merrill, Barney, 1975, p. vii). As journalists seek to tell the truth, they are often confronted with conflicting values, rights, priorities, and loyalties. In the case of the newspaper's suicide coverage, the decision-making process appeared to be based on standard journalistic news criteria and no specific philosophical ethical foundation was considered. In retrospect, however, *The Times* appeared to have followed at least four basic philosophic ethical models. An after-the-fact analysis will be considered here.

First, the newspaper appeared to have followed Aristotle's philosophy of a "Golden Mean." Aristotle's moral philosophy proposes a reasonable compromise between excess and deficit with the decision centering on the mean between the two (Sommers, Sommers, 1989, pp. 181-190). In applying this philosophy to the suicide coverage, the newspaper could be seen to have struck a mean in its reports of the suicides. The reports told a painful truth, but omitted some details. It balanced that by providing information on how to seek help and quoting mental health experts. The story recounted the love of the teens, but then provided a realistic physical description of their battered bodies after death, and told of the pain the suicides caused others.

Deni Elliott (1989), Mansfield professor of Ethics and Public Affairs at the University of Montana, also took an

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Aristotelian approach to the ethical dilemmas inherent in media suicide coverage and said the decision to publish does not necessarily mean a choice between a story and a life. She said, "Journalists don't need to be heartless to protect the integrity of their work" (p. 8).

Second, the newspaper appeared to adopt a utilitarian approach to the suicide story. Utilitarianism is based on the theories developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It says that ethical decisions should be based on the principle of seeking the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In this instance, it is the ends, or the consequences of the act, not the means that matter (Pojman, 1990 p. 75). This teleological theory includes two types, "act" and "rule." Under act utilitarianism, an "act is right if and only if it results in as much good as any available alternative" (p. 77). Under rule utilitarianism, "an act is right if it conforms to a valid rule within a system of rules" (p.78). *Times* Editor Martin said that "hundreds, if not thousands" of people would be affected by the suicides and they needed information. She also said that she believed the newspaper did a service for the public by publishing the story and how to seek help (personal communication, November 17, 1993). If this philosophy is applied, then journalists appeared to focus on the consequences of the greater good for the greater number.

Third, the newspaper's decisions reflected Philosopher W.D. Ross' prima facie theory. Philosopher Louis P. Pojman (1990)

called Ross an "objectivist rule-intuitionist" (p. 94). Ross based his philosophy on the rule-deontological system, and believed that moral principles are obvious, by intuition, to any person who considers them. An objectivist, he argued that every rule has its exceptions and a person must prioritize duties depending on the situation. He created a list of prima facie duties, such as fidelity, nonmaleficence, and justice, that take priority. The newspaper appeared to have prioritized its duties and ranked fidelity to its journalistic mission to tell the truth as its primary obligation, and ranked beneficence, justice, and nonmaleficence as important, but secondary.

Fourth, the philosophy of William Frankena could also apply to this case. Frankena proposed a mixed-rule deontological ethical philosophy that centers on rules, but takes consequences into account (Pojman, 1990, pp. 108-110). He maintained that it is impossible to judge the amount of good or evil resulting from an act, and suggested instead that people apply principles of beneficence and justice. Beneficence creates duties that are active: a duty to not only not inflict harm, but to prevent it and a duty not only to remove evil, but to promote good. These duties, however, are overridden by the principle of justice, which means treating every person with respect. Frankena said that when these conflict, people must use their intuition to decide whether to override justice (p. 110.) In the case of the suicide coverage, the newspaper appears to have depended more upon journalistic "intuition" rather than moral philosophy to

make its decisions.

Philosopher Ralph Potter developed a plan - The Potter Box - for ethical decision-making that journalists could use to help clarify their reasoning in suicide coverage. The plan consists of a four-step systematic process by which journalists logically work their way through an ethical problem (Christians, Rotzoll, & Fackler, 1987, pp 2-7). In the Potter Box, the situation is defined, and operating values and philosophical principles are identified. Finally, the journalist is asked to consider where his or her loyalties lie, who benefits from the story and who gets hurt. Values considered could include being honest, responsible, helpful, and caring. Had the Potter Box method been used, it seems likely that higher weight would have been assigned to journalistic principles of preserving independence and telling the truth.

VI. WHAT JOURNALISTIC PRINCIPLES INDICATE

Robert Steele (1993), director of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies' Ethics Program, said that ethical decision-making is a skill, like writing - a craft that can be learned by practice. In the case of teen suicide coverage, such a skill is needed in order to follow the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics as well as the journalistic principles outlined by Black, Steele and Barney (1993) in their book Doing Ethics in Journalism. They identified three guiding principles for the journalist: a) Seek the truth and report it as fully as possible, b) Act independently and, c) Minimize harm. In

this case of the double teen suicide, all three of these guiding principles appear to compete against one another. When these principles conflict, the stage is set for an ethical decision-making process. Steele (1993) said that consultative dialog is an important first step in any such process. Without a philosophical foundation to follow, reporters and editors are sometimes guided by their gut instincts instead of ethical reflection (Steele, 1993).

Steele (1993) argued that there are three levels of decision-making. At the first gut-reaction level, the ethical decision-making process stops. At the second level, rules come into play such as the newspaper's general policy against running suicide stories. It is at the third level, with discussion and consultation, where alternatives are explored and the ethical decision-making process can begin based on reason and reflection. Steele (1993) stressed, however, that journalists are in the business of putting stories in the paper not in keeping them out. All discussion should start from that premise, he said. Martin said that *The Times* made its decision to cover the story and to play it on page one based on news criteria, but staffers and editors engaged in a discussion process throughout the story development (personal communication, November 17, 1993).

Steele (1989) said that journalistic values of newsworthiness, timeliness, and immediacy often collide with ethical values of compassion, honesty, and minimizing harm. Journalists must also weigh the story on the basis of the

public's right to know, the public's need to know or just wanting to know, he said. Martin said that the newspaper was obligated to run the suicide story primarily because of the public's need to know; in fact, she indicated the newspaper may have provided a public service in alerting the community to the problem (personal communication, November 17, 1993).

Journalism professor Louis A. Day (1991) said journalists must approach suicide stories with compassion, but often compassion conflicts with competition and deadline pressures, and leads to a moral lapse. Day said that reporters must weigh the news value of the story and sensitive facts against the possible loss of dignity for the suicide victim and the intrusion of privacy and the inflicting of further pain upon the family. The journalist must remain independent, however, and not back off from a difficult story just because its content may have the consequence of causing more suicides (chap. 5, p. 204). Conrad C. Fink (1988), like Day, believes the focus of a suicide report should be on the message communicated in the story. This message depends on the personal values and attitudes of the journalists and their personal code of ethics (p. 36). This could relate to a virtue-based character ethic, which would be important in following the moral intuition espoused by Frankena's philosophy.

VII. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Ralph Barney and John C. Merrill said that the methodology of journalism often takes precedence over the motivations and the consequences of journalists' work in determining "what is right

to do" (p. vii), and this appears to be the case in the newspaper's coverage of the teen suicides. *The Times'* decision-making process was primarily based on journalism routines and news criteria. Although there was a process of discussion and reflection upon the news coverage, this was regular newsroom routine rather than a directed and concerted effort toward achieving ethical decisions. Richard P. Cunningham (1993) said the reason why journalists are unable to explain their ethical decision-making process is because they don't have any idea how they do it. They tend to justify their actions by citing journalistic practice (p. 10). Cunningham said that journalists must be able to verbalize the principles and values they have considered in making their decision. Steele (1993) asserts that ethical journalism and excellence in journalism are one and the same. Producing excellent and ethical journalism, however, demands that reporters and editors are aware of potential ethical issues in stories. Research indicated the media have a strong role to play in producing stories on suicide that not only are true to journalistic principles of truth, fairness, and accuracy, but are also faithful to ethical principles as well.

In this case, the *St. Petersburg Times* participated in no formal, ethical decision-making process, but relied on standard newsroom procedure and journalistic news criteria. In critiquing the newspaper's coverage according to standard philosophical methods, it seemed that the newspaper chose a mix of approaches. On one hand, it chose a teleological approach and justified the

coverage on the basis of the greater good for the greater number. The editor viewed the story, not only as meeting several news criteria, but as an opportunity for the paper to provide needed information to the community.

It appeared, however, that the primary response was based on mixed deontological philosophies that favor the intuition of the decision makers whenever an ethical conflict arises. The newspaper unconsciously ranked its obligations according to prima facie duties identified by Ross. It selectively tempered the journalistic values of telling the truth with information to minimize harm. Editors chose not to use the word "suicide" in the headline, and chose not to cover the church prayer service, the memorial service at the bridge, or the funeral. Nor did it publish the suicide note [a television station showed a readable close up of the note]. The newspaper also appeared to be cautious with its use of quotes and included interviews with two psychologists in their stories as well as publishing the warning signs of suicide and telephone numbers to call to seek help. The mixed-rule deontological method of Frankena also calls for use of intuition in prioritizing duties. *The Times'* style book guidelines on suicide are purposefully vague, which allowed gatekeepers to use moral and/or journalistic intuition on suicide stories.

In the suicide stories, there are a number of conflicting, values, principles, and loyalties involved. The one criticism leveled at the newspaper's coverage centered on the romanticized

image of suicide felt to be presented. Given the "love" element of the story itself, editors indicated it was necessary to tell that side of the story. Nevertheless, the element of romanticizing a suicide is an important one to consider, when writing the headlines and story. Romanticizing suicide not only creates a false picture, but could have negative effects on other at-risk teenagers.

In a transition sentence in the second day story, the reporter wrote, "Marc and Donna's problems ended sometime late Monday night or early Tuesday morning" (*The Times*, Aug. 27, 1993, p. 5B). The editor agreed that an argument could be made against the use of that sentence, which appeared to suggest that suicide is a viable option to ending problems. In analyzing *The Times'* coverage, it is apparent that newsroom routines and standard operating policies took precedence rather than any specific checklist on ethical decision-making process. Research on this paper concludes that the probable philosophical method to apply in covering suicides is that of mixed-rule deontology. Duty and obligation - not only to journalistic principles but to the subjects of the story and to the community - must certainly be primary. Yet the consequences and justice of the report must also be considered, applied not just in terms of utility for the greatest number, but a primacy toward respect for the dignity of the individual - the victim, family members and teens at risk.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Media and mental health experts contend that the media have

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a responsibility to society to develop principles to guide them in ethical coverage of suicide stories. Berman (1989) said that the media are on the defensive in this issue, and reject the idea that they may be part of the problem (ASAMHA, Vol. 4, p. 193).

If the words used in suicide stories have the potential for saving lives or encouraging further deaths, it makes sense that the media be informed. Steele (1993) said it is imperative to get beyond the gut reaction element in ethical decisions and move toward discussion and collaboration to formulate an ethical decision based on reason and reflection.

There have been numerous guidelines published on how to ethically cover a suicide story. The following list is a compilation gleaned from research, media experts, psychologists, personal interviews, and the American Association of Suicidology. The list takes only a few minutes for journalists to review, and could help prompt discussion in newsroom efforts to provide ethical, responsible teen suicide coverage.

Guidelines for Journalists Covering a Teen Suicide:

* **Be sensitive to the pain and shock of surviving friends and family. Put yourself in the place of the parents or siblings of the teen who committed suicide. Or put yourself in the place of a parent who has an at-risk teen-ager who has already considered suicide and now reads that his/her friends have died. How would you want a reporter to handle the story?**

* **Ask yourself what the public really needs to know about the suicide. Avoid descriptions of the manner of death that may serve as a "how-to" guide for vulnerable teens.**

* **Be alert to quotes obtained in this highly emotional situation. Avoid quotes that indicate they have "gone to a better place" or are now happy because they are no longer in pain. Just because a quote is accurate doesn't mean it is**

* Be cautious in the use of photos. A smiling face from a yearbook may give a false picture of the present situation, and subtly serve to promote a positive, "glorified" celebrity image to other vulnerable teens.

* Understand the potential for harm in how the story is played in the newspaper, and take special care in writing the headline. While adhering to journalistic principles, be aware of the impact potential of a front page story on teen suicide.

Red Flags in Suicide Coverage

* Any simple, one-reason, explanation of the suicide.
* Information that places blame.
* Quotes about "God's will" or "gone to a better life."
* Information that appears to justify the suicide.
* Anything that glamorizes the suicide or, conversely, reinforces the stigma concept.

ethical. Quotes have the potential to cause great harm. Be aware that not all students are friends of the teen-ager who died, and their quotes may not be accurate or representative.

* Question any information in the report that assigns or suggests blame. While a journalist may interpret events, it is unlikely anyone, least of all the journalist, knows why the person committed suicide. Suicide is the result of numerous events and situations. Avoid the temptation to focus on one angle to explain the death. Speculation can be dangerous.

* Seek consultation from suicide experts in the mental health field as well as from editors. Seeking information from experts outside the media provides more insight with which to make a responsible ethical decision, and does not jeopardize a journalist's independence.

* Provide some balance to this ultimate story of hopelessness. A quote from a mental health specialist such as "Mental health experts say that no matter how bad a problem may be, there is always some way to solve it" provides another view of hope.

* Be aware of any phrases that may serve to give the perception that the suicide was justified, or that suicide is a romantic way to die, or that suicide is a reasonable option to resolve problems. Strike a balance between portraying suicide as acceptable and portraying it as a stigma that will mark the survivors.

* Use caution in using the word, "suicide." It is not only a highly charged word, there may not be enough information to be certain of its accuracy.

* Always include a sidebar story or a box of information on how to recognize suicidal signs and the telephone numbers of where to call to seek help or solace after a suicide. This information should run with the first story, but if that is impossible, it should always be included in a follow-up story.

* Try proactive "greenlight" journalism and develop stories that educate the public. Show that there are solutions other than suicide, such as reaching out to friends and seeking professional help. Consider following up the suicide story with related stories that focus on the positive aspect of choosing life such as interviews with suicidal teens who received help before it was too late.

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